NSA surveillance programs facilitate global drone war

Thomas Gaist
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Documents leaked by Edward Snowden and published in the *Washington Post* Wednesday show that NSA surveillance operations play a key role in the global campaign of assassinations being waged by the Obama administration.

The *Post*'s report, "Documents reveal NSA's extensive involvement in targeted killing program," testifies to the integration of the surveillance apparatus exposed in recent months into US imperialism's global military operations. Officials cited by the *Post* said that the NSA has deployed analysts to work along side Central Intelligence Agency personnel at the CIA Counterterrorism Center and at "every major US embassy or military base overseas."

The report further documents the NSA's systematic attempts to overcome encryption, including the extraction of PGP encryption keys from targets. The agency reportedly was able to capture 16 keys from a single electronic raid on a suspected Al Qaeda computer.

According to the report, the NSA's "Tailored Access Operations," a cyber warfare and intelligence-gathering program, conducts surveillance of targets in Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Iran, and throughout Africa. TAO runs programs such as UNITEDRAKE and VALIDATOR, which launch cyber attacks using "software implants" to grab sensitive data such as keystroke logs and audio files.

ArsTechnica reported in August that advanced software used by TAO enables operatives to tap directly into hardware such as "routers, switches and firewalls," and that TAO's activities are integrated into data systems such as XKeyscore.

Information gathered by the NSA has been used in particular in the course of the CIA's drone war in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan. As summarized by the *Post*, the NSA has "draped a surveillance blanket over dozens of square miles of northwest Pakistan." One US intelligence official told the *Post*, "NSA threw the kitchen sink at the FATA." To date, at least 3,000 people have been killed as a result of US drone operations in Pakistan, including hundreds of civilians.

Both the NSA surveillance and the policy of drone war that it facilitates are criminal operations, carried out in violation of international law. The Obama administration asserts the right to kill anyone in the world without due process, including US citizens, in violation of the Bill of Rights. Among those killed have been US citizens, including Anwar al-Awlaki and his teenage son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, in Yemen.

A full accounting of the Pakistanis murdered by US drones may never be completed. However, a study published by Stanford University and New York University earlier this year showed that large sections of the population living in the FATA suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the buzzing of drones overhead and the never-ending barrage of ordnance raining down on the area.

UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights Ben Emmerson wrote in March of this year, "As a matter of international law, the US drone campaign is therefore being conducted without the consent of the elected representatives of the people, or the legitimate government of the state. It involves the use of force on the territory of another state without its consent, and is therefore a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty."

The *Post* described the leaked NSA documents as "self-congratulatory in tone" and "drafted to tout the NSA's counterterrorism capabilities." According to *Fox News*, the *Post* withheld substantial information

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about the drone strikes “at the request of US intelligence officials.”

The *Post* report highlights the case of Hassan Ghul, who was killed as a direct result of intelligence acquired through electronic surveillance operations run by the NSA. After his capture in 2004, Ghul was held at a secret CIA prison in Eastern Europe until 2006, where he was subjected to “enhanced interrogation techniques” (i.e., torture), including slapping, sleep deprivation and stress positions.

In 2006, Ghul was transferred to Pakistan, where he was released and rejoined Al Qaeda militants in Waziristan. Ghul worked to set up logistical networks for Al Qaeda after being freed, according to a Treasury Department document from 2011. No explanation has been offered by US or Pakistani authorities for Ghul’s release.

Ghul was then killed in 2012 by a drone strike in Mir Ali, after having been monitored for a year prior to his death by a secret NSA unit called the Counter-Terrorism Mission Aligned Cell (CT MAC), which specializes in finding high priority targets in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Ghul’s location was discovered through analysis of an email sent to him by his wife. His death was never officially acknowledged by the US government, despite the fact that his interrogation supposedly provided intelligence about an Al Qaeda courier named al-Kuwaiti, which purportedly led to the killing of Osama bin Laden.

The scope of the integration of the NSA, CIA, military and police agencies extends far beyond what is taking place in Pakistan. The entire world is the subject both of the intelligence-gathering operations of the NSA and the drone strikes of the CIA.

Under the Obama administration, the NSA’s surveillance operations gather the communications of virtually every telephone and Internet user on the planet, US citizens and non-citizens alike. This week has already seen new evidence emerge that the NSA is stealing address books—which often contain large amounts of personal information—from various web platforms and storing them in its archives. (See: “ NSA ‘harvesting’ electronic address books and contact lists”).

The possibility of strikes being launched against American targets has been raised by top officials, and drones are already deployed on non-strike missions over the US. In a letter of March 4, 2013, Attorney General Eric Holder wrote that the president “has the power to authorize lethal force, such as a drone strike, against a US citizen on US soil, and without trial,” saying that in certain cases such action would be “necessary and appropriate.”

If and when such operations are initiated, the state will have no shortage of data with which to target Americans, whose communications are subject to constant scrutiny by the surveillance apparatus.

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